

★ **The Harmattan Winds**

Sylvain Trudel

Donald Winkler, Translator

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Sylvain Trudel's novel *The Harmattan Winds* is an unusual coming-of-age tale imbued with undercurrents of magic, mystery, and tragedy.

Hugues is an adopted orphan of unknown ethnic origins who falls under the spell of Hakébé, an African immigrant who's steeped in his homeland's rituals and beliefs. As the youngsters contend with the racism of their drab Canadian town, they're drawn into each other's fantasies of ancestral ghosts and mystical islands. They embark on a series of misadventures that place them and others at risk.

Even as Hugues and Hakébé's antics cross the line from dangerous to destructive, they command empathy. Hugues narrates; his point of view is funny and hyperbolic. He invests mundane events with world-shattering importance. But as misguided as the boys may be, they're also touching in their optimism and their desire for belonging in an environment where they experience cultural clashes and alienation.

Absorbed with the act and art of storytelling, the book spins striking conceits out of everyday occurrences: a dinner of vegetables and mashed potatoes is reimagined as a castle wall under assault; a strict family is compared to cowardly scorpions. As Hugues and Hakébé venture into the hinterlands beyond their town, the story underscores the poignancy and recklessness of their endeavor: the boys make do with toy wagons instead of trailers and wear hockey pads for armor. Hugues and Hakébé's grand schemes seem doomed to go awry as the book builds to a violent, fabulistic conclusion that recasts much of what happened earlier in a melancholy light.

In the powerful novel *The Harmattan Winds*, young men struggle against their circumstances, seeking connections with and acceptance from others.

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